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Phuong's Caged Throne

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Phuong's Caged Throne

Though the most obvious moral conflict in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* is between Fowler and Pyle, no understanding of the book's moral dynamics is complete without the perspective granted by the book's third main character. In contrast to the flashiness of Pyle's idealistic heroism and Fowler's near-paralytic moral relativism, the character of Phuong provides a more subtle commentary on how femininity impacts one's ability to display agency and engagement. Everything Phuong does is a reflection of her gender. More specifically, it reflects what she has been taught her gender should mean. Both Pyle and Fowler fail to recognize that Phuong is powerful in her own way, using her ample social abilities to influence both of them. At the end of the book, her engagement in love superficially pays off as she, Fowler states, gets her "happy ending," but this comes at a price (188). The absoluteness of her commitment to achieving a "good European marriage" is a binding and dehumanizing contract (40). Though she wields both Pyle's goal-seeking devotion and Fowler's cynical pragmatism, Phuong's gendered strategy cages her because it makes her reliant on the presence of a man.

Phuong is defined by the absolute goal taught to her by her sister, Hei. Fowler correctly judges Hei's priorities in the latter's first appearance, stating "it sounds as though you were examining Mr. Pyle's marriageability." If Phuong had been a brother, Hei would surely have had different priorities. Phuong, however, was clearly female, so Hei taught her that it ought to be her

goal to attach herself to a man. This is corroborated by others around her; as Phuong returns to Fowler's house after Pyle's demise, the old women on Fowler's porch say that she has "come home" (12). Fowler himself is aware that Phuong's life is bound to marriage, referring to her possessions as a "dowry" (145). All of this is reflected in Phuong's own attitude, as she laughs when Fowler asks if Pyle is "in love with [her]," yet shortly afterward she says much more sincerely "he's going to marry me" (13-14). It is telling that, in her establishing scene, Phuong is dismissive of love but makes her commitment to marriage clear. Ultimately, marriage defines Phuong's moment of triumph. When Helen divorces Fowler, Phuong is quick to celebrate, immediately remarking that she "must go and tell [her] sister" (188). Phuong's victory is also a victory for her sister and for the idea of wealth-seeking marriage. Put in those terms, Phuong's seeking of marriage is eerily similar to Pyle's talk of Democracy and the Third Force. In terms of commitment to and focus on a goal, Phuong is easily Pyle's equal.

Phuong knows that she, as a woman, is not supposed to be involved directly with war, and so she approaches it only by proxy. When Phuong discovers Pyle's importing of plastics, she takes care to give Fowler valuable information while keeping her own hands clean. By calling the bomb materials "just plastics" she deftly avoids giving Fowler the idea that she might become engaged in war at all (72). Later, she is conveniently not present for the bombings, having been "warned" by Pyle (161). Indeed, Phuong is present for none of the book's scenes of violence, despite her impact on the plot. The idea that Phuong understands that she is supposed to be sheltered is evinced further by the scene with the female impersonators (45). Pyle uses Phuong as his reason to leave, saying that it "isn't a bit suitable for *her*" in a clumsy attempt to conceal his own discomfort. Phuong does not outwardly object to this mischaracterization of her at all,

simply allowing Pyle to persist in his delusion. Her methods for dealing with war are subtle, yet as undoubtably effective as her methods for dealing with love.

In contrast to her veiled approach to war, Phuong unabashedly exerts the power that gender dynamics grant her in the arena of love. The men desire and the woman delivers. Phuong attracts men by delivering sexual pleasure, opium, and reassurance on demand. When Phuong abandons Fowler for Pyle, Fowler says that "Pyle's taken my girl," a gross misattribution of agency (147). He was closer to the mark when he said "she wouldn't stay against her will" (132). Phuong shows that she is far more than simply a jewel to be squabbled over by acting as mediator and judge in Pyle and Fowler's battle for her affection. A simple *no* from her is enough to defuse a heated battle between the two (79). As much as Pyle and Fowler might posture in front of Phuong, they are forced to defer to her deciding vote. There is no more convincing demonstration of her power. Phuong's actions are evidence of a focused and sophisticated strategy for approaching love.

Hardly concerned with the monomaniacal ideals that often characterize discussion of love and romance, Phuong pragmatically applies a range of tools to influence the men around her. She weaponizes opium, using it as a tool to cause Fowler to depend on her. Fowler remarks that "it was a superstition among them that a lover who smoked would always return, even from France," perhaps not noticing that the superstition was grounded in truth (13). Later, Fowler notes that he "hadn't smoked since Phuong left [him]," thus illustrating that he has come to associate the act with his relationship with Phuong (151). Shortly afterwards he demonstrates that Phuong's sexual activity serves a similar purpose; when he tries to have sex with another woman, the memory of Phuong interferes and causes him to fail in the act (153). Phuong

attempted similar tactics on Pyle, asking whether he would smoke as well, but Pyle proved less susceptible (79). Had she not thought that he was sincere in his promise to marry her, Phuong would likely have abandoned Pyle for the man she could more reliably control. That is not to say that she cannot control Pyle, who says that she is "the most important thing there is" (177). This is a testament to the effectiveness of Phuong's tactics. Even Phuong's speech – and absence of speech – is deliberately calibrated. Zakia Pathak expounds on this in *The Prisonhouse of Orientalism*, stating that Phuong uses silence as part of a strategy to "avoid commitment to any statement or programme which might compromise the future she is pursuing" (414). Phuong's non-commitment is epitomized when she discovers Pyle's death, simply thinking a "long private thought" before resuming her relationship with Fowler (22). Fowler was right to wonder "am I the only one who really cared for Pyle?" While Fowler's cynicism and desire for disengagement aspire to pragmatism, Phuong achieves it fully.

Despite all her talents, Phuong is imprisoned by the lifestyle she has chosen. Fowler is a reporter, Pyle is a government operative, and even Phuong's sister Hei is a good enough English-speaker and typist to work for the Economic Mission, but Phuong has nothing to sell except her body. Multiple characters assume that she is a simple whore. Vigot's second question to her is "how much has [Pyle] paid you?" (16) and Granger is quick to ask her "got a date tonight?" (35). Though Fowler deflects the latter assumption by saying she "has a date every night" he merely obscures the fact that Phuong's courtship of him and Pyle is basically a subset of prostitution. Fowler's language when he says that "they love you in return for kindness, security, the presents you give them" may paint an insulting picture of Vietnamese women, but in Phuong's case it isn't too far from the truth. She seeks men she believes can give her fiscal support, and the text

provides little evidence that she would know what to do if that option were taken away from here. For all her talent at coaxing men to become dependent on her, it is evident that the state of dependence is mutual.

In Miriam Allot's essay *The Moral Situation in The Quiet American*, she argues that "we need Pyle's courage and none of his ignorance, Fowler's moral intelligence and none of his indecisiveness" (468). Phuong is not ignorant or indecisive, but her commitment to appearing demure and inoffensive renders her moral intelligence and courage hard to judge. Whatever she might have been was crushed in the dehumanizing grip of her identity as a Vietnamese woman. However much manipulative ability she shows, her engagement with the game of love is an absolute commitment. Without it and without men, she would be nothing. Through her, Greene demonstrates both the powers and limitations that Vietnamese women had – and to an extent still have. The stereotypes that shape and define Phuong are very much alive even now. To assess the effect that they have, we need merely listen to Phuong herself: "I never remember my dreams" (189).